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ABSTRACT

Methods used in teaching literature in a high school senior English course are described briefly. The first semester of the course in English literature is taught as a survey course, which is presented chronologically; thus the students' first experience with 19th century poetry is with the Romantics. It appears that there is some value in teaching some of the really bad poems of the writers of this period (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelly, and Keats), as this seems to increase the students' empathy with the poets. One of the most effective techniques for teaching poetry is said to be that of comparison and contract. In the course discussed, the student who develops a special interest in one or more of the poets can choose to study this poet in depth with as little or as much guidance from the teacher as he desires. One way of accomplishing this is through the use of a long critical paper, which every senior writes, based on the reading of at least two works or authors. (DB)

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Teaching Nineteenth-Century Poetry in a High School English Class

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We can divide our goals in teaching any of the literature we teach into two broad areas, which I am going to treat in a very over-simplified manner for which, I trust, I may be forgiven. The first goal is to make the literature bearable, maybe even enjoyable, for those students who have been indifferent or antagonistic to it before; the second is to open new vistas for those students who are for one reason or another already enamoured of literature and receptive to anything we throw at them. For the first group I am willing to stoop to a little sugar-coating; for the second group I find that introduction to riches and an opportunity to browse among them are about enough.

In Lawrence High School senior English in the first semester we approach English literature as a survey course taught chronologically; thus the first experience which the students have with nineteenth-centuray poetry (in the senior year, that is; they have met nineteenth-century American poetry in junior English — is with the Romantics. Now in my opinion, if there is a pud in high school English teaching, the Romantic Period is it. To begin with, the students come upon it straight from the eighteenth century; and although some students very much enjoy the literature of the eighteenth century, there is something about a concentration in it of even a couple of weeks that gives them a certain feeling of comaraderie with those early Romantics who rebelled against it. I believe students actually feel ready after such a terribly cerebral century to turn to the rush of feeling that began so neatly in 1798 with the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads*. The introduction to this period is one time that I have found a lecture goes well. There is so much to say about the advent of the period, the characteristics of Romanticism — so deliciously contradictory and provocative — and the lives of the major poets themselves that if you want to practice your lecture techniques only once a year, this might be the very best time to do it.

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I believe that, no matter how you present the background information, this is no time for the New Criticism. The lives and personalities and personal experiences of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats are too fascinating to ignore. These may be the first English writers the students have met with whom almost all can identify. Now it is true that the really hard-core revolutionary of today will not accept these people as brothers in revolution, but we have as yet an extremely minute number of truly radical revolutionaries in our high school. Most of my students so far can really relate to the kind and degree of rebellion, intellectual, political, social, personal, and artistic, of the English Romantics; if anything, the writers are a bit too wicked for most of the students, but of course in a wholly titillating way. They also find these poets, especially Byron, Shelley, and Keats, warmly human, sometimes rather pathetic, sometimes quite tragic, often very funny. In this connection I am going to con-

fide something rather shocking and that is that I discovered quite by accident once, and have used the knowledge ever since, that there is some value in teaching some of the really bad poems of these writers — the ones you have to dig out of old anthologies or the Complete Works because they never appear in modern anthologies. I mean things like Shelley's "Indian Serenade":

> Oh lift me from the grass!
> I die! I faint! I fail!

(I always wondered why on earth in that order.)
Now I remember very well that when I first came upon that poem at about age sixteen, I thought Shelley and I had no more to say to each other; and this was an unfortunate attitude from which I didn't recover until a gifted professor led me through "Ode to the West Wind" and other lovely things some years later. But if bad poems like "Indian Serenade" and those things by Byron that are in such execrable taste ("When we two parted/In silence and tears/Half broken-hearted/To sever for years" and "Fare thee well! and if for ever/Still for ever, *fare thee well!*" and so on) — if such poems are presented in a certain way just at the time students are pretty much hooked anyway on these characters, they seem to me to increase the students' empathy with the poets. They may react with a kind of healthy wonder that even a Great Poet sometimes wrote very sentimental, very sloppy and very imprecise poetry.

One of the most effective techniques that I have found for teaching poetry is comparison and contrast, and often the first two poems I offer for such an analysis come from the Romantic Period: Wordsworth's "She Was a Phantom of Delight" and Byron's "She Walks in Beauty." Most students, I've found, think it's fun to compare techniques, language, style — and the two ladies who are subjects of the respective poems. The similarities in the poems and in the ladies are more striking than the differences, but most students are perceptive enough to discover for themselves that Wordsworth's subject, unlike Byron's, is touched with reality; that she grows — after the first stanza — into "a creature not too bright or good/For human nature's daily food." And they are perceptive enough to become aware of the reasons for this; of the difference in depth of feeling for a woman intimately known, no matter how idealized the vision of her may remain, and the depth of feeling for a woman merely glimpsed, wearing a spangled ball gown, at a party.

Later I like to use the comparison and contrast approach using a poem from the older literature and one of our own time, preferably a poem in the students' own vernacular. A pair of poems that has worked well for me is the nineteenth-century "Porphyria's Love" by Robert Browning and Bob Dylan's "Fourth Time Around."

There are some rather obvious likenesses between the two poems. Each tells of the dramatic end of a stormy love affair. Each is related by the lover who, in the case of the Browning poem, has certainly murdered his sweetheart, and in the opinion of most students has done so in the more ambiguous Dylan poem as well. Each poem has its own clusters of images, each appropriate to the poem. Each contrasts the Inside with the Outside, though this contrast is much

stronger in one poem than in the other. In "Porphyria's Lover" the Outside is hostile in every way: nature, revealed in the stormy, sullen, and spiteful wind, threatens against the cottage door; society is an enemy, bent on luring Porphyria away from her lover. The Inside, the place of love, is all light and glowing warmth. The contrast in "Fourth Time Around" is far more subtle; it is suggested only in the line, "I stood in the dirt where everyone walked." It is he, the lover, who goes Outside — is forced out, thrown out — and the place is not particularly hostile — it is simply the forlorn place "where everyone walked." We have no real picture of the Inside, either, but we infer its warmth and its *specialness* by the narrator's sense of *loss* and by the implied contrast with the "dirt" outside "where everyone walked." We know too that it's a place where something very special — symbolized by the Jamaican rum — was available that the sweetheart is no longer willing to give — even in return for all the lover has — his very last piece of gum. In this same Outside, though, the lover in "Fourth Time Around" finds a new life, a new girl — or, we think, an old girl re-embraced — perhaps for the fourth time? Porphyria's lover, on the other hand, must shut himself and Porphyria Inside forever; he has, in effect, destroyed the Outside.

Porphyria's lover is of course quite mad; an analysis of his symptoms presents an almost classic clinical case. Is the lover in "Fourth Time Around" mad as well? Again the poem is far more ambiguous than the other. He is far more realistic, certainly; he sees his sweetheart's selfishness, even viciousness, quite clearly and does not blame it on mere weakness or on influences over which she has no control. He clearly sees the destructiveness of their relationship or its break-up or both; he expresses his awareness of this destructiveness in his images of violence and infirmity: deafness, "breakin' my eyes," wheelchair, crutch he doesn't fool himself, as Porphyria's lover does, that when he kills his girl — if he kills her — it doesn't hurt:

> She screamed till her face got so red
> Then she fell on the floor.

Is he, however, fooling himself in other ways? What was his relationship before with the girl to whom he runs now? Are her wheelchair and her crutch her dependence on him, which he has alternately rejected and half-accepted? Is he really not asking for her crutch? He seemed to realize that the girl who threw him aside could not communicate:

> Your words aren't clear —
> You'd better spit out your gum

but does he think he can communicate with his new-old girl on the terms implied in the last three lines of the poem?

> And I, I never took much —
> I never asked for your crutch —
> Now, don't ask for mine.

What I have done here is relate and telescope some of the ideas that students themselves have come up with in looking at these two poems. An analysis of either poem is rewarding; an analysis of the two together seems to me to have some added values. It may be interesting to note that after studying these particular two poems, my students have almost unanimously decided that "Porphyria's Lover" is the infinitely superior poem. I've never *asked* them to judge one of the poems as better than the other. On the contrary, I have tried to discourage *this* kind of comparison as I'm more interested in their seeing that different poets describe somewhat similar situations and feelings in very different ways, but I've never prevented the question from arising. The result, even from the most ardent Dylan fan, has always been the same. I think this is worth mentioning only because it has helped to satisfy me that high school students can like nineteenth-century poetry. And I think there is some valuable carryover for the student. If he was prejudiced against any poem written before 1960, I believe he may have discovered in an activity like comparing two poems, old and new, that he'd do better in future to keep an open mind. Provided, of course, I restrain myself from saying, "I told you so."

Now I'd like to say a little about our provisions at my high school for the student who falls in love with a period or a writer and wants to spend far more time on it or him than the few weeks the class as a whole may spend on a period, or the day or two we may spend on an individual writer. On paper in our curriculum we have very little place for Independent Study — we are now starting on a Quest program, but it's a small beginning. In practice I think we are all committed to the idea of giving the student time and opportunity to pursue his own special interests. One of several ways we do this is through the use of a term paper, which every senior writes. This is NOT a research paper, but a long critical paper based on the reading of at least two works or authors. The student who develops a special interest in one or more of the nineteenth-century poets, whom we necessarily treat pretty superficially in the actual class work, can choose to study this poet, or these poets, in depth with as little or as much guidance from his teacher as he desires. (This is of course true of any period or writer he becomes interested in, but I'll use nineteenth-century poets as my example here.) When I was asked to do this presentation, I thought of a particularly good paper I received from a student two years ago which I thought was an appropriate example. I asked this student's permission to use excerpts from his paper to illustrate the use to which an interest in nineteenth-century poets can be put by students, especially in combination with a study of a modern poet. This student was enrolled in my second-semester course in Negro Literature; his special interest was Jimi Hendrix.

I would be very reluctant to present this paper in this form to any other audience in the world; but I know that a group of English teachers will understand that in presenting these excerpts I have omitted the student's transitional ideas, in some cases, and have certainly done an injustice to the excellence of the paper. But I think you will be interested to see how closely this student has read the English Romantics, as well as Jimi Hendrix, in his preparation.

During the nineteenth century, there was a literary revolution taking place

in Europe. This revolution was a change from reason to romanticism; from reason to passion and emotion; from strict ways of behavior to eccentric, almost antisocial disregard for conventions; from the Newtonian world of science to a world filled with mystery and mysticism; from conformity to individuality; from the modern and civilized to the simple and rustic; from the study of the whole to the study of the individual; from interest in the usual and natural to the study of the abnormal and strange; from the concrete and direct to the complex and fanciful; from poetic diction to common language; from indifference towards social problems to a broad humanitarianism; from the ascendency of reason to the ascendency of the imagination.

There were four major elements of this age's thought: a love of all things in nature, including man when he is in a natural environment; praise of the individual, the non-conformist, and all that is free; an almost joyous melancholy; and a love for the strange and the supernatural.

. . . .

Since the nineteenth century, there have been several transitions between periods of reason and periods of romanticism. We are presently in the midst of one of these ages of romanticism. Many of the changes that occurred . . . are reoccurring now. . . .

. . . .

. . . The only major difference . . . is that today's poets are also for the most part musicians. Some of these musicians use their music as a poet would use paper: as a foundation for the poem itself. Others use their music as a poet uses his poetry; the music itself expresses the musician. A very few musicians use their poetry and their music together, as a poet uses rhyme and rhythm the music and poetry go together to create a feeling, which is the poem of the musician. One such musician is Jimi Hendrix.

In the few years that Hendrix has been writing, he has already shown characteristics of both romantic thought and romantic style. And, just like the romantic poets before him, Hendrix wants to see and hear everything, for this is the final goal of romanticism; to see and hear everything, from the most mysterious sounds of the Orient to the most simple sounds and sights of the English countryside.

I want to see and hear everything.
("Up From The Skies")

Not many students, of course, do their research so thoroughly or put their papers together as well as this student did. But I believe the assignment presents an opportunity for each student to live awhile with his special interest

and to do the best work of which he is capable. The student who is keenly attuned to literature is happy in his work, and the formerly antagonistic student may have found by now that poetry and all that is not so bad as he once thought.

Lawrence, Kansas
October 1970

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